

March 3, 2008
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Kalispell Office

Montana State Library, Helena

MT Environmental Information Center

Montana Audubon Council

Montana Wildlife Federation

Green Mountain Conservation District, P.O. Box 1329, Trout Creek, MT 59874

U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena

State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group, 548 Elk Creek Road, Heron, MT 59844

Joe DosSantos, Avista Corp., P.O. Box 1469, Noxon, MT 59853

Richard Johnson, P.O. Box 1304, Libby, MT 59923-1304

US Forest Service, Cabinet Ranger District, 2693 Highway 200, Trout Creek, MT 59874

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling for the restoration of fish habitat and the removal of a significant sediment source on a short reach of the East Fork Bull River, a tributary to the Bull River. The proposed project is located approximately 8.5 miles north of the community of Noxon in Sanders County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5 P.M., March 31, 2008 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Funding for this project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
East Fork Bull River Channel Restoration Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purposes of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for the restoration of a short segment of the East Fork Bull River recently adversely affected by a natural slope and stream bank failure along a historic side channel. In recent years, this side channel had captured a majority of the flow in the river. As a result, ongoing erosion from this slide appears to be the largest point source of sediment into the East Fork Bull River. This project proposes to re-route the river back to the original main channel to provide for a more stable environment and decrease sediment delivery to the active channel. The intent of the project is to benefit both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The project site is located approximately 8.5 miles north of the community of Noxon in Sanders County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on the East fork Bull River, a tributary to the Bull River in the Clark Fork drainage, located approximately 8.5 miles north of the community of Noxon within Township 27 North, Range 32 West, Section 7 in Sanders County.

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to “restore and enhance degraded habitats” by implementing the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on public and private lands. This proposal would help achieve this goal.

The East Fork Bull River supports both westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout and has been ranked high in a restoration prioritization developed through a watershed assessment that was completed in 2005. Bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and westslope cutthroat trout are considered a species of special concern in Montana. During 2006, a slope and stream bank failure occurred on a historic side channel of the East Fork Bull River and now is considered a significant point source of sediment by the US Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Avista Corp. and the Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group. Because stream runoff will not be able to move the amount of debris that has been deposited into the active channel as a result of this slump, the slope will continue to erode and major amounts of sediment will continue to be transported downstream, potentially adversely affecting fish habitat and past stream restoration efforts that have been completed in the basin. This project proposes to re-route the affected channel away from the slump and back to the historic main channel, effectively bypassing the landslide.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to re-route the effected channel back to a historic main channel located to the south, bypassing additional risks associated with the mass wasting. This stream reach is approximately 800 feet in length. The new channel would be stabilized at strategic locations and pool features will be incorporated into the design. Between three and five large woody debris jams will be incorporated into the new channel design to create pools and overhead cover for fish habitat. The pool to riffle ratio would mirror upstream reference conditions. The deactivated channel would be filled with excavated material to floodplain elevations, effectively bypassing the unstable slump area. The slump area will be left as is. This project is expected to cost \$65,584.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$15,000.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Re-routing the channel away from the active land slump will substantially reduce a major point source of sediment into the East Fork Bull River, protecting downstream fish habitat and past stream restoration efforts that have been completed in the basin. The installation of woody debris jams and associated pools will create improved habitat conditions for resident fish.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, construction will occur during a low flow period and operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota (318 authorization). A 310 permit will be obtained from the local conservation district and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). In the long term, bypassing an actively eroding landslide would reduce chronic sediment contributions to downstream areas, thereby improving the overall quality of downstream waters.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during project construction, but would stabilize quickly following proposed re-vegetation and stream bank stabilization efforts. Overall, the project is expected to reduce bank erosion and improve channel stability.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, re-

vegetation efforts, in conjunction with stream bank stabilization efforts, would result in an overall improvement to the riparian vegetative community.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely affected due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources

The East Fork Bull River supports both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Because the river supports bull trout, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park's Section 6 conservation plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Re-routing the river back to the original main channel and away from the active slump is expected to provide for a more stable environment and decrease sediment delivery to the active channel.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project likely will require an individual Army Corp of Engineers 404 permit. Therefore, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted to determine the need for compliance with the federal historic preservation regulations. Funding will not be released until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

It is anticipated that this proposed project would improve overall aquatic habitat and, as a result, would enhance resident trout populations. Consequently, the project is expected to improve the recreational fishery in the stream.

13. Locally adopted environmental plans and goals.

A local watershed group, called the Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group, serves as an umbrella organization for seven watershed councils formed to improve the water resources on the lower Clark Fork River and associated tributaries. Restoration work proposed in this project was reviewed and approved by this organization.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a chronic point source of sediment will continue to be delivered into a portion of the East Fork Bull River, adversely affecting downstream fisheries and fish habitat. Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations residing in downstream reaches of the river potentially

could be impaired.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to reduce sediment loading to the East Fork Bull River by re-routing the existing channel away from an active landslide area. This alternative would eliminate a significant point source of sediment entering the river and would protect the existing fisheries and help maintain past restoration efforts that have been completed on downstream reaches.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks web page: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5 P.M. on March 31, 2008.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
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MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
 1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
 (406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title East Fork Bull River Channel Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division -Future Fisheries Improvement
 Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding to a project calling for re-routing an 800-foot segment of the East Fork Bull River away from an active landslide to eliminate a significant point source of sediment delivery. The intent of the project is to benefit both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The project site is located on the East Fork Bull River approximately 8.5 miles north of the community of Noxon in Sanders County.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites					X	X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals			X			X
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Green Mountain Conservation District, AVISTA, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office
 Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Mike Miller, Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: February 11, 2008